

The body's physiological response to stress – increased heart and breathing rate, high blood pressure, sweating, heightened senses and muscle readiness, increase of adrenaline – is experienced by all individuals at times of excitement and happiness, as well as times of anxiety and duress. This stress response is the body's natural reaction to the environment and prepares us for 'flight' (running away) or 'fight' (dealing with the situation head on). The majority of individuals in the general population have developed a repertoire of coping behaviours or strategies, which enable them to deal with stress effectively. These include activities like socialising, exercising, meditating, smoking and eating. If carrying out an activity like these acts reduces stress levels, we are likely to perform these activities again when next under pressure.

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders are vulnerable to stressors and it is likely that the characteristics of this population make them especially vulnerable. Their communication and social deficits make it difficult for them to understand situations, and to express their discomfort. Additionally, their heightened sensitivity and irritability due to sensory processing problems can cause nervous system arousal and increase stress.

As well as being vulnerable to stressors, individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders often display behaviours not considered appropriate by the general population, to help them cope with stress. These behaviours may include repetitive actions, motor stereotypes, self-injury and tantrums. It is important to remember that these strategies are functional for the individual with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, in that they serve to reduce the anxiety the person is feeling. When individuals are prevented from engaging in these behaviours, their

stress levels naturally rise and a vicious cycle of compounded stress is begun.

Relaxation is an effective strategy for counteracting the physiological response of stress. Muscle relaxation and regulated calm breathing lowers heart rate and blood pressure and reduces the 'flight or fight' arousal state. It is an effective coping strategy that has been demonstrated as a powerful stress reducer in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Helping them to generalise this behaviour across settings and to use the relaxation response in times of stress can reduce the display of inappropriate behaviours and increase access to educational programs and community activities.

Teaching relaxation to individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders involves increasing their ability to recognise and monitor stress signs and levels, and then being able to implement the relaxation response. It is a long term intervention, which can then be utilised by individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders for the rest of their lives to address stressful situations and feelings. There are two main approaches to teaching relaxation: conditioned relaxation and progressive muscle relaxation.

### **Conditioned relaxation**

Conditioned relaxation involves 'conditioning' the relaxation response in individuals, with the aim being that in response to a minimal external cues eg the 'relax' Compic, verbal cue to relax, arm massage, asking, "What can you do now?" the individual will automatically relax. This approach involves having the individual lie down and breathe deeply, sometimes being massaged to promote muscle relaxation, for a period of 20 minutes. Initial programs may have maximum goal times set at 2 minutes,

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or less, to ensure initial success at lying still and breathing. Eventually, the length of time spent relaxing can be built up until the response to the cues is ingrained in the individual.

### **Progressive muscle relaxation**

Progressive muscle relaxation requires an individual to learn how to recognise signs of stress – such as tension – and then consciously relax specific muscles, breathe deeply and remain still and calm. Again, the aim is for 20-minute periods of relaxation. Once the relaxation response is learnt and the individual can reliably respond to external cues, relaxation can be used as a strategy for intervention in stressful situations (many individuals begin this step independently). Parents and professionals can cue the relaxation response before, during and/or after a stressful event, to reduce the stress response. Long term goals of relaxation programs should aim for the individual to independently cue himself / herself when faced with a stressful situation, and visual cues or verbal rehearsals of stressful situations can assist in this. Additionally, adaptive behaviours, such as asking for help or communicating sensory overload, can be taught in conjunction with relaxation.

### **Simple tense-stretch-relax games which often use guided imagery**

Start with whole body movements and progress to specified areas of the body. Ask children to:

- Be a kite stretching high into the sky on a string. Then float back down to the ground and relax
- Be a snowman, rigid, tightly packed. The sun comes out and the snowman slowly melts to the ground
- Be a birthday candle on a cake. Slowly it burns and melts into the yummy icing
- Be a clock gradually winding down
- Be a tall, strong tree then a floppy rag doll
- Be a long straight flagpole then a puppet on a string
- Be a stiff fence post then wobbly jelly on a plate
- Float like a feather around the room, the wind stretching their arms and legs until the wind stops and they float gently to the floor
- Place large beanbags or washing basket on their backs and pretend to be turtles stretching their head and legs out from the shell then back to sleep inside the shell in the warm sun
- Make themselves into a knot so tight that an adult can lift them without coming untied
- Mirror your movements until you are both lying on the floor
- Remain completely still when they are touched by the magic wand and then they slowly fall to the ground.

### **Tense-relax activities that look at specific body parts can be useful**

O'Neill's book (1993) has some useful examples like this one for the neck:

“Now stretch up your neck

Make it feel long like a swan's or a giraffe's.

Pull your shoulders down as far as you can.

Stretch out your neck. Make it as long as possible.

Stretch a bit more for a tender leaf just out of reach. Got it! Let go and relax.

Repeat several times.”

### **Breathing Activities**

All relaxation is related to breathing. A deep breath is the key to starting the relaxation response. Ask children to:

- Place their hands just above their stomach and feel their ribs move as they breathe in and out. Inhale for a count of three, say RELAX as you breathe out
- Lie on your back and place a toy, book or

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object on your chest. Watch it move up and down as you breathe in deeply and then slowly breathe out.

- Use a balloon as a demonstration, slowly filling up, slowly breathing out
- Be a balloon getting big and small
- Be the wind blowing like a gale or gently like a breeze
- Be a dog who can pant, howl for the length of one breath
- Use whistles, noise makers to encourage a deep breath then a long, consistent breath out.

### **Modeling**

Use a large Raggedy Anne doll or floppy soft toy to demonstrate how the arms and legs flop to the ground. Ask the children to copy.

### **Additional Reading**

Cautela, Joseph R and Groden, June (1978) *Relaxation: a comprehensive manual for adults, children, and children with special needs.* Champaign, Ill, Research Press.

Cautela, Joseph R and Groden, June (1978) *Relaxation techniques for people with special needs.* Champaign, Ill, Research Press.  
(Video)

O'Neill, Catherine (1993) *Relax.* Swindon, Child's Play.

Rickard, Jenny (1992) *Relaxation for children.* Camberwell, Vic, ACER.